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## SPINOZA'S RETHINKING OF ACTIVITY: FROM THE *SHORT TREATISE* TO THE *ETHICS*

ANDREA SANGIACOMO and OHAD NACHTOMY

**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues that God's immanent causation and Spinoza's account of activity as adequate causation (of finite modes) do not always go together in Spinoza's thought. We show that there is good reason to doubt that this is the case in Spinoza's early *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-being*. In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza defends an account of God's immanent causation without fully endorsing the account of activity as adequate causation that he will later introduce in the *Ethics* (E3def2). We turn to an examination of how God's immanent causation relates to the activity of finite things in the *Ethics*. We consider two ways to think about the link between God, seen as immanent cause, and the activity of finite things: namely, in terms of entailment and in terms of production. We argue that the productive model is most promising for understanding the way in which the activity of finite things and God's immanent causality are connected in Spinoza's (mature) philosophy

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## 1. RETHINKING THE ACTIVITY OF FINITE MODES

An immensely important strand of the *Ethics* is the call to be active; the more active one is, the less passive one is, and thus the more freedom and happiness one shall gain. Spinoza argues that increasing our activity will lead us to be more rational and self-aware, thus enabling us to achieve a higher degree of freedom by acting out of our own nature, rather than being affected and constrained by external forces (E4 appendix, iii, v). Indeed, maximizing our activity and thus our knowledge of God or Nature is the only path to true salvation, that is, a kind of salvation not fraught with superstition, delusion, and wishful thinking.

However, the notion of activity and its role in the development of Spinoza's ethical project has raised concerns among Spinoza scholars.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we focus on a fundamental ontological problem that seems to have implications for Spinoza's account of activity, namely, whether any finite mode can be considered to be "active" in the sense Spinoza spells out in E3def2. On the one hand, Spinoza identifies activity with a kind of causation that arises from the nature of a mode itself. This point is suggested by Spinoza's definition: "an adequate cause [is that] whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through the said cause" (E3def1);<sup>2</sup> and Spinoza maintains that "we are active when something takes place, in us or externally to us, of which we are the adequate cause" (E3def2). On the other hand, Spinoza maintains that finite modes are constantly determined by external causes (E1p28). It thus appears to be the case that no operation of a finite mode could ever be produced independently of the determination of external causes, and, if so, would never count as properly active.

The most common way to address this problem in recent scholarship has been to ground the activity of finite modes in their *conatus*. Indeed, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bennett (1984, 324–28), for example, questioned the consistency of Spinoza's notion of activity and its role in Spinoza's therapy of the passions. Given Spinoza's claim that human beings are constantly acted upon by external causes, Bennett doubts that it would be possible to become properly "active." Lee Rice, Martin Lin, and Colin Marshall have offered various strategies to deal with Bennett's challenge and make sense of how human beings could reach a sufficient degree of activity to mitigate the passions. See, for instance, Rice 1999; Lin 2009; and Marshall 2012. LeBuffé (2010, 215–22) elaborates on the connection between being active and the mind's capacity of forming adequate ideas. Sévérac (2005, 81–108) offers instead an account of activity based on the notion of "agreement in nature," according to which an individual is active insofar as it is determined to operate on the basis of common properties that it shares with external causes. This view is further developed by Sangiacomo (2015a).

<sup>2</sup> Citations of Spinoza's *Ethics* follow Spinoza 1994; the other works are quoted from Spinoza 2002. The main abbreviations are the following: E = *Ethics*, Ep = *Letter*, KV = *Short Treatise*, TIE = *Treatise on the emendation of the intellect*, Def = *Definition*, Dem = *Demonstration*, Expl = *Explication*, P = *Proposition*, Pref = *Preface*, and S = *Scholium*.

third and fourth parts of the *Ethics* Spinoza argues that finite modes are active when their power (or conatus) to persevere in their own being (E3p6) succeeds, that is, is not impaired by external causes. However, this approach would seem to simply displace the problem of activity by raising the further question of what entitles Spinoza to claim that finite modes *have* a conatus in the first place. Some recent scholars have approached this further issue by stressing that Spinoza's conatus doctrine is grounded in another crucial feature of Spinoza's ontology, namely, that God "is the immanent, and not the transitive cause of all things" (E1p18d). As Valtteri Viljanen points out, "the roots of the conatus doctrine run deep, right to those opening propositions of the *Ethics* that deal with the basics of existence and causation."<sup>3</sup> If God's immanent causation implies that each mode of God's substance strives to persevere in its own being, then insofar as a mode's striving is not impaired by other modes, it is self-determined and thus may be regarded as active. The conjunction between God's immanent causation and the activity of finite things is made explicit in the demonstration of E3p6, where Spinoza writes, "singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by IP25C), that is (by IP34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts."

In what follows we argue that God's immanent causation and Spinoza's account of activity as adequate causation (of finite modes) were not always as tightly connected in Spinoza's thought as readings like the above would suggest. In particular, we show that there is good reason to doubt that this is the case in Spinoza's early *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-being*. This point is important insofar as it raises the question of which further conceptual move would be required to establish the conjunction between God's activity and the activity of finite modes in the *Ethics*. In section 2, we argue that in the *Short Treatise* Spinoza defends an account of God's immanent causation without endorsing the account of "activity" as adequate causation that he introduces in E3def2.<sup>4</sup> In section 3, we turn to an examination of how God's immanent causation relates to the activity of finite things in the *Ethics*. We consider two ways to think about the link between God, seen as immanent cause, and the activity of finite things: namely, in terms of entailment and in

<sup>3</sup> Viljanen 2011, 98. See also Lærke 2011 and 2012. For further discussion of Lærke's position, see section 3. Bennett (1984, 231–51) challenged the overall consistency of Spinoza's conatus doctrine. For a reply to Bennett see Garrett 2002. Sévérac (2005, 33–68) offers a different way to link God's infinite activity and power and the activity of finite modes: he stresses the use of the term 'vis' (force) in E2p45s and reads the "conatus" in terms of *force of existence*, which expresses God's own power.

<sup>4</sup> Spinoza may be seen to make this point figuratively in the *Short Treatise* by saying that finite things are like "clay in the potter's hands" [*chomer beyad hayotzer*]. Spinoza employs this biblical metaphor on several occasions, e.g., TTP, n. 34.

terms of production. According to the entailment reading, finite things follow from God's nature in the same way certain properties follow from (or are entailed by) the nature of a triangle. In this reading, Spinoza would understand causation mostly in terms of *formal* causation (i.e., as the way in which properties follow from a certain essence or definition) rather than in terms of *efficient* causation (i.e., as the way in which a thing causally affects another thing distinct from it). This interpretation of the relationship between God and finite things in Spinoza is prevalent in recent scholarship.<sup>5</sup> However, we argue that it does not allow for an adequate account of the way in which God's immanent causality supports the activity of finite things. We advance a different model, the "productive" model, according to which the nature of finite things is constituted by their power of bringing about certain effects, which express God's power and essence. As Spinoza states in E3p7, finite things' power of acting is constitutive of their essence.<sup>6</sup> Mogens Lærke recently drew attention to this point by underlining that "when Spinoza defines the 'essence' of something, be it substance or mode, he does not refer to its concept. He refers to its power" (2011). Building on this point, we argue that the productive model is the most promising for understanding the way in which the activity of finite things and God's immanent causality are connected in Spinoza's (mature) philosophy.

From a historical point of view, the paper stresses a significant difference between the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics*, which has been overlooked. According to the standard reading of the KV, this work is best understood as a preparatory draft of the *Ethics*. Presumably, Spinoza abandoned it because he was dissatisfied with its style and decided to expose his philosophy *more geometrico*.<sup>7</sup> However, there is a growing interest in Spinoza's early works, and several scholars observe that the differences between the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics* are not limited to Spinoza's use of the geometric method.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Chantal Jaquet (2004) and Emanuela Scribano (2011) argue that the two works present two completely different accounts of the passions. Ursula Renz (2015) stresses a stark contrast between Spinoza's account of the intellect in the KV as "purely passive" and his later account of the human mind as endowed with the power of producing its own representations. Daniel Garber (2015) and Yitzhak Melamed (2015) observe that even

<sup>5</sup> For a recent and powerful defense, see Viljanen 2011.

<sup>6</sup> See Lærke 2009; 2011; 2012 and Di Poppa 2010.

<sup>7</sup> This view is presented, e.g., in Nadler 2006.

<sup>8</sup> The "rediscovery" of the philosophical relevance of the KV for the understanding of the development of Spinoza's philosophy has been significantly fostered by Filippo Mignini's critical edition of the text, published with an impressive philological and historical commentary (Spinoza 1986, recently represented with a shorter commentary in Spinoza 2009).

fundamental points of Spinoza's metaphysics, such as the definitions of substance and attributes, and the rejection of Cartesian dualism, receive significantly different treatments in the KV and the *Ethics*. Our analysis adds to this recent reappraisal of the KV, showing that Spinoza's account of God's immanent causation in the KV does not present an account of finite things that are active in the sense of being adequate causes (as Spinoza would later define activity in E3def1–2). We argue that, while Spinoza's notion of adequate causation entails a robust sense in which finite things can be considered "active," in the KV Spinoza admits only a weak sense of activity, which amounts to the fact that finite things operate as merely passive instruments of God's proper activity.

## 2. ACTIVITY AND PASSIVITY IN THE *SHORT TREATISE*

In this section, we reconstruct Spinoza's position in the KV in three steps. First (section 2.1), we present the way in which Spinoza introduces the notion of God's immanent causality. Second (section 2.2), we outline Spinoza's account of general providence and the laws of nature. On this account, finite things are not only determined by external causes, but their own strivings can succeed only insofar as they are subordinated to the general laws of Nature or God's general providence. We stress that Spinoza regards God's immanent causation as compatible with considering finite things as passive instruments of God. Third (section 2.3), we present Spinoza's further argument that God must be regarded as the only true cause operating in nature.

### 2.1. *God's Immanent Activity*

The question of God's activity appears for the first time in KV1, 2 where Spinoza is mainly concerned with demonstrating that extension is one of God's infinite attributes.<sup>9</sup> This position raises the following concern: if extension implies divisibility and God is extended, then it would seem that God is divisible. Divisibility, the objection goes, is in conflict with God's unity and, if so, extension seems to be incompatible with God's nature. Moreover, the objection continues, "when extension is divided it is passive, and with God (who is never passive, and cannot be affected by any other being, because he is the first efficient cause of all) this can by no means be the case" (KV1, 2, 44). Here Spinoza argues that "division, then, or passivity, always takes place in the mode" (*ibid.*, 45). Accordingly, by considering extension as an infinite

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<sup>9</sup> For a fuller examination of Spinoza's evolution between the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics*, see Sangiacomo 2013.

*attribute* of God, there is no risk of considering God as divisible or passive as well, since passivity is in the modes and not in the attribute as such. As Spinoza claims “when, therefore, I divide water I do not divide the substance, but only that mode of the substance, which substance, however, variously modified is always the same” (ibid.). Modal division leaves the substance untouched, and thus it does not threaten God’s unity.<sup>10</sup>

Spinoza associates passivity with divisibility. Traditionally, degradation or corruption (both of which presuppose division) bring about the destruction of finite bodies. If natural bodies do not tend toward self-destruction by their nature, it can be plausibly argued that division, insofar as it destroys the body, is caused by external causes. Spinoza assumes that “all passivity that passes from nonbeing to being, or from being to nonbeing, must result from some external agent, and not from an inner one: because nothing, considered by itself, contains in itself the conditions that will enable it to annihilate itself when it exists, or to create itself when it does not exist” (KV2, 26, 100). According to Spinoza, division implies an action on the part of an external agent and passivity on the part of the divided thing. Nothing can divide itself because, in doing so, it would bring about its own destruction. Consequently, if a thing is divided, there must be some external cause dividing it. Thus, division implies the passivity of the thing divided.

The connection between divisibility and passivity is particularly relevant for Spinoza’s attribution of extension to God. If extension is an attribute of God, and if we accept that extension implies divisibility and thus passivity, it seems to follow that God himself is subject to external causes. This is undoubtedly a conclusion that Spinoza would like to avoid. For this reason, he has to show how attributing extension to God does not undermine God’s perfect unity and activity. Spinoza’s solution consists in showing that extension itself, insofar as it is conceived as an attribute of God, must be understood as infinite. Insofar as extension is infinite, it precludes the existence of anything outside itself capable of acting upon it. Therefore, God’s extension cannot be subject to external causes. Because divisibility presupposes the action of an external agent, insofar as extension is considered to be infinite, it cannot be divisible.<sup>11</sup> Divisibility and passivity are thus restricted to finite modes alone. Spinoza argues that,

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<sup>10</sup> This point is not different in the *Ethics*. Our point is that on the basis of a similar starting point the KV takes a different path, i.e., it does not defend a robust sense of activity as in the *Ethics*.

<sup>11</sup> Spinoza uses the same strategy in E1p12 and E1p15s. It should be noted that Spinoza understands the infinity of substance in a qualitative sense of completeness rather than as a magnitude. On this point, see E1p12. In E1p12 Spinoza also explains in which sense an infinite substance can be regarded as divisible when its nature is conceived through imagination.

When we say that man passes away or is annihilated, then this is understood to apply to man only insofar as he is such a composite being, and a mode of substance, and not the substance on which he depends. Moreover, we have already stated, and we shall repeat it later, that outside God there is nothing at all, and that he is an *Immanent Cause*. Now, passivity, whenever the agent and the patient are different entities, is a palpable imperfection, because the patient must necessarily be dependent on that which has caused the passivity from outside; it has, therefore, no place in God, who is perfect. Furthermore, of such an agent who acts in himself it can never be said that he has the imperfection of a patient, because he is not affected by another. (KV1, 2, 45)

*Prima facie*, Spinoza conceives of passivity as being acted upon by external causes: the “patient must necessarily be dependent on that which has caused the passivity from outside” (KV1, 2, 45). Along with his previous remark, according to which passivity “always takes place in the mode” (ibid.), Spinoza’s position suggests a distinction between God (or *natura naturans*, KV1, 8, 58), who is absolutely active, and finite modes (or *natura naturata*, KV1, 9, 58–59), which are acted upon by external causes (and thus passive).

Insofar as extension is an attribute of God, the immanent cause that operates within extension must be God himself. As Spinoza writes in the passage quoted above: of “an agent who acts in himself it can never be said that he has the imperfection of a patient, because he is not affected by another.” Spinoza introduces the concept of *immanent* cause to convey this very idea: God cannot be considered a causal patient because he is not acted upon by anything else, and whatever happens in him is the result of his (immanent) activity. Extended things, as modifications of God’s extension, require external (finite) causes to put them into motion or to divide, produce, or destroy them in specific ways and circumstances. However, these causes must derive from God’s immanent activity. Thus, finite effects have to be considered as the “immanent effects” of God’s activity or, as Spinoza puts it in chapter 3 of the first part of the KV, as “God’s Immanent Works” [*Gods inblyvende Werken*].

Spinoza’s ontology, as developed in the KV, presents God as an immanent cause. In this way, Spinoza attempts to defuse the objection that considering God as an extended substance implies that God is passive in some way. In clarifying how the passivity of the finite modes does not apply to God’s substance, Spinoza maintains that finite modes are acted upon by external causes (while God is not). The next subsection develops this point with respect to the laws of nature.

## 2.2. *Providence and the Laws of Nature*

In the KV, Spinoza does not only argue that finite modes are acted upon by external causes. He also argues that Nature as a whole is structured in a strict



top-down fashion, according to which general laws determine and constrain more specific laws, or (to use Spinoza's theological language), God's general providence restrains God's special providence. In this subsection, we present how Spinoza articulates this view.

In KV1, 5, Spinoza introduces an important distinction between God's "general" and "special" providence. As he explains:

The second attribute, which we call a *proprium* of God is his Providence [*Voorzienigheid*], which to us is nothing else than the *striving* [*poginge*] which we find in the whole of Nature and in individual things to maintain and preserve their own existence. For it is manifest that no thing could, through its own nature, seek its own annihilation, but, on the contrary, that every thing has in itself a striving to preserve its condition, and to improve itself. Following these definitions of ours we, therefore, posit a *general* and a *special providence*. The *general* [providence] is that through which all things are produced and sustained insofar as they are parts of the whole of Nature. The *special providence* is the striving of each thing separately to preserve its existence. (KV1, 5, 53)

The general and special providences are different insofar as general providence is the striving through which the whole of nature preserves itself, while special providence is the striving of each finite thing to preserve its own individual existence. Spinoza suggests that the strivings of finite things are subordinate to the more general striving of nature as a whole, that is, to God's general providence. The preservation of nature as a whole is more fundamental (from an ontological point of view) than the preservation of any finite thing in particular, and the former has priority over the latter. Since special providence concerns modes, while general providence concerns substance, Spinoza's ontology entails that special providence depends on general providence in the same way in which the existence of modes depends on the existence of substance.

This subordination of special providence to general providence is made more explicit by Spinoza's further discussion of the way in which the laws of nature (which express God's immanent and infinite activity, or *natura naturans*) determine each finite thing's operation. He writes:

When the laws of Nature are stronger, the laws of men are made null [*vernietigt*]; the divine laws are the final end for the sake of which they exist, and not subordinate [*geonderordent*]; human [laws] are not. Still, notwithstanding the fact that men make laws for their own well-being and have no other end in view except to promote their own well-being by them, this end of theirs may yet (insofar as it is subordinate to other ends which another has in view, who is above them, and lets them act thus as parts of Nature) serve that end [which] coincides with the eternal laws established by God from eternity, and so, together with all others, help to accomplish everything. For example, although the Bees, in all their work and the orderly discipline which they maintain among themselves, have no other end in view than

to make certain provisions for themselves for the winter, still, man who is above them, has an entirely different end in view when he maintains and tends them, namely, to obtain honey for himself. (KV2, 24, 6, 96–97)

The general laws of Nature are “stronger” in the sense that they are not subordinate to any other law. By contrast, the laws that govern finite beings (e.g., human laws) are subordinate to the general laws of Nature. This distinction between the laws of Nature (or general laws) and the laws of men (or particular laws) corresponds with the distinction discussed above (KV1, 5) between general and special providence. In the same way that special providence (i.e., the striving of each thing to persevere in its existence) is subordinate to general providence (i.e., the striving of the whole of Nature), particular laws of Nature are subordinate to general laws.

Subordinate laws are efficacious only insofar as they abide by the general laws. Subordinate laws (and the individuals following them) *seem* to operate for their own sake, but this is true only if their activity “is subordinate to other ends which another has in view, who is above them, and lets them act thus as parts of Nature” (KV2, 24, 6, 96). As Spinoza notes, “when the laws of Nature are stronger, the laws of men are made null” (*ibid.*), which means that, if subordinate finite things (such as human beings) attempt to preserve their own being in a way that runs against the preservation of Nature as a whole (i.e., against the general laws of Nature), they will necessarily fail. Spinoza’s view does not imply that finite things will not affect the causal processes in which they are involved. Rather, Spinoza’s position excludes that finite things could bring about effects that depend on their own finite nature *alone* without also depending on or being aligned with the general laws of Nature.

Finite things participate in the ongoing causal process that is the whole of Nature, but this does not entail that they will be able to bring about effects that depend on their nature alone or that would foster their striving in their own existence alone. Rather, finite things are constantly ruled and constrained by the system of infinite laws of Nature. Finite things are parts of a causal process conducive to improving the existence of the whole of Nature. As discussed in the previous subsection, for Spinoza, passivity amounts to being acted upon by external causes: “the patient must necessarily be dependent on that which has caused the passivity from outside” (KV1, 2, 45). In his discussion of general and special providence, and in his account of the laws of Nature, Spinoza makes clear that finite things depend on external causes and on the general order of Nature as a whole. As a result, finite things are passive insofar as they are parts of Nature that are determined and

acted upon by external causes and subordinate to the general laws of Nature.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.3. *Activity in the KV?*

The claim that finite modes cannot produce an effect without being determined by external causes provides Spinoza with a powerful argument against the possibility of free will (KV2, 16, 81–82). In order to reinforce his argument against the self-determination of the will, Spinoza employs the Cartesian machinery of continuous creation. The doctrine of continuous creation entails that the existence of finite things requires a constant act of re-creation by God. Spinoza rejects Descartes's agnostic attitude concerning how continuous creation can be accommodated with human freedom.<sup>13</sup> He states,

The same activity is required of God in order to maintain a thing in existence as to create it, and . . . otherwise the thing could not last for a moment; as this is so, nothing can be attributed to it. But we must say that God has created it just as it is; for as it has no power to maintain itself in existence while it exists, much less, then, can it produce something by itself. . . . Thus, then, as there is nothing that has any power to maintain itself, or to produce anything, there remains nothing but to conclude that God alone, therefore, is and must be the efficient cause of all things, and that all acts of Volition are determined by him alone. (KV2, 16, §4 note, 81–82)

According to Spinoza, God's continuous creation is not limited to the action of sustaining creatures in their existence. In fact, Spinoza infers that the same act through which God constantly conserves a thing's existence also determines all its modifications. Insofar as a finite thing "has no power to maintain itself in existence while it exists, much less, then, can it produce something by itself." This implies that the source of causal efficacy of finite things must be the same as the cause of their existence—namely, God. Finite things thus seem to be deprived of any causal efficacy of their own. Although Spinoza's main target in this passage concerns the human will, his argument is formulated in general ontological terms that apply to *every* finite thing.<sup>14</sup> This implies that no finite thing can have any causal efficacy, since whatever the thing can bring about derives from God's continuous re-creation of it.

Valterri Viljanen has argued that the above passage seems to commit Spinoza to a kind of "proto-occasionalism," according to which finite modes

<sup>12</sup> From this point of view, the discussion developed here is similar to the way in which Spinoza will demonstrate that human beings are necessarily subject to passions in E4p1–4.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Principles*, I, arts. 40–44.

<sup>14</sup> The analogous conclusion is reached in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, arguably written in the same period as KV (see chronology in Sangiacomo 2013, 53–66). See, e.g., CM2, 11, 207.

would not just be passive but would also be deprived of any causal power whatsoever. As Viljanen explains (2015, 194): “I would suggest that in the *Short Treatise*, talk about actions or causal powers of things is, in fact, metaphorical. In the final analysis, it is only God who has power, whereas finite things have none.” Spinoza’s argument concerning passivity (KV1, 2) maintains that finite things are simply acted upon by external causes and unable to bring about effects of their own. Spinoza’s continuous creation argument explicitly states not only that finite things are passive but that God is the *only* active and efficacious cause in nature.

*Prima facie*, this conclusion seems to contradict some passages in the KV in which Spinoza talks about “activity.” Let us consider this objection. At the end of the second part, Spinoza writes:

The more essence [*wezen*] a thing has, so much more has it also of activity [*doening*], and so much less of passivity. For it is certain that what is active acts through what it has, and that the thing which is passive is affected through what it has not. . . . Since the essence of God is infinite, therefore it has an infinite activity, and an infinite negation of passivity, . . . and, in consequence of this, the more that, through their greater essence, things are united with God, so much the more also do they have of activity, and the less of passivity: and so much the more also are they free from change and corruption. (KV2, 26, 100)

Arguably, the “essence” of a thing is what defines the nature of the thing and what that thing can do.<sup>15</sup> In this context, having “more essence” refers to the fact that the richer the essence of a thing, the more effects it produces. This entails that God, whose essence is infinite, is also infinitely active, because God produces everything and no effect can be produced independently of God. Spinoza thus argues that things can be active insofar as they are “united” with God. For instance, Spinoza points out that the “True Understanding” [*waare verstand*] does “not emanate from external causes, but from God, so it is not susceptible to any change through them. . . . God has produced it immediately” (KV2, 26, 101). Spinoza’s account here is clearly hierarchical: God has more essence than infinite modes, and infinite modes have (infinitely) more essence than finite modes. Once again, we find an implementation of the top-down approach discussed with regard to general providence and laws of nature.

Insofar as finite modes have some degree of essence (at least) they should also enjoy some degree of activity. However, as Spinoza’s account of general and special providence suggests, insofar as a thing is a part of nature, its

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<sup>15</sup> Spinoza further discusses this point in his correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh. See, on this point, Sangiacomo 2016.

striving to persevere in its own being is constantly determined by and ultimately subordinated to the striving of the whole of Nature. A finite mode that would strive to persevere in its own finite being *against* the striving of the whole of Nature would simply be destroyed (“vernietigt,” as we saw in KV2, 24, 96). Finite things can be active (to the minimal degree of activity that is determined by their ontological status) only insofar as they completely subordinate their own striving to the striving of the whole of Nature, namely, to God’s general providence. Insofar as this happens, finite things operate as immanent effects of God’s own activity, and, it turns out, their own activity amounts to nothing more than what God does *by means* of them. Upon closer inspection, therefore, Spinoza’s discussion of activity in the KV reduces the activity of finite things to the operation of passive instruments of God’s own activity. As Spinoza puts it:

Man, being *a part of the whole Nature* [*deel van geheel de Natuur*], on which he depends, and by which also he is governed, cannot of himself do anything for his happiness and well-being . . . . It follows therefrom that we are truly servants, aye, slaves, of God, and that it is our greatest perfection to be such necessarily. (KV2, 18, 85)

Spinoza’s ethical recommendation in the KV is to “be God’s slave” because only insofar as the operations of a finite mode (such as a human being) are aligned with the striving of the whole of Nature (or with general providence) can they be successful.<sup>16</sup>

To summarize, in the KV, every finite mode is constantly acted upon by external causes. Spinoza conceives of the activity of finite modes as strictly parasitic on God’s activity. Finite modes, considered in themselves, cannot succeed in expressing any independent activity unless they function as passive instruments of God’s own activity. To use the terminology that Spinoza will introduce in the *Ethics*, finite modes can only be “partial causes” (E3def2). That is, whatever they produce must be understood always and only in terms of their relationship to the external causes and more general laws of Nature that determine them. In the KV, Spinoza does not allow for the possibility that finite modes might bring about effects in virtue of their “nature alone” (E3def1). From this point of view, Spinoza’s argument about God’s concurrence can be envisaged as another way of stating that only insofar as finite modes operate as instruments of God’s activity can they bring about effects.

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<sup>16</sup> Spinoza echoes Saint Paul in stating that human beings relate to God as “clay in the hands of a potter” (Romans 9:20–21; Jeremiah 18:1–12) in several places. See TTP n. 34, Letter 75, TP2, 22. However, the metaphor seems to have mainly a *moral* meaning rather than explaining the ontological relation between God’s activity and finite things. The fact that Spinoza also uses this metaphor in later works does not commit him to the same claim for passivity (cf. indeed TTP4, 1).

As we shall argue in the next section, in the *Ethics* Spinoza's view will change significantly: instead of conceiving the activity of finite modes as completely subordinate to God's immanent activity, he presents God's own activity as fully expressed by the activity of finite modes.

### 3. THE *ETHICS*: IMMANENT CAUSALITY AND ACTIVITY

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza upholds the notion of God as an immanent cause and maintains that every finite mode is determined to exist and to operate by an infinite chain of other finite modes (E1p28). Despite this constant determination of finite modes by external causes, a finite mode can be "active" insofar as it is an adequate cause of certain effects, that is, insofar as a given effect can be understood on the basis of the mode's nature alone. A crucial difference between the notion of activity in the KV and the notion of "adequate cause" (spelled out in the *Ethics*) is that in the *Ethics* Spinoza's definition no longer relies on the thing's greater or lesser "essence," reality or perfection. Indeed, things with greater perfection or reality (like God or infinite modes) remain the "more active." However, the definition of adequate cause does not discriminate in advance between things that have different degrees of reality but focuses instead only on the conceptual link between the thing's nature and the effects attributed to it. For instance, if it belongs to the nature of the human body to move its arm, this movement will count as an activity of the human body (E4p59s) even when the human body is determined to produce this action in certain circumstances rather than others because of certain passions. In the KV, what makes finite modes "active" (in the KV's weak sense) is the connection between their operations and God's general providence. In the *Ethics*, what makes finite modes active (in the sense of being "adequate cause") is the connection between their own essence and the effects they produce. This apparently subtle change suggests that finite modes can be regarded as active in a more robust sense than the one presented in the KV and discussed in section 2.

However, the question of how the activity of finite modes, seen as adequate causes, relates to God's own activity becomes even more pressing. As was mentioned in the introduction, the standard interpretation of Spinoza's account of activity holds that the activity of finite modes is ultimately rooted in the fact that they express God's activity (*via* the reference to E1p34 contained in the demonstration of E3p6). However, the way in which God's power and immanent activity provide the ontological ground for the activity of finite modes is far from clear. Our claim is that the common way to understand this relation is misleading and thus we will offer an alternative reading

of the relation between the activity of finite things and God's immanent activity.

The most common way to understand this relation is that of entailment.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this model is suggested by Spinoza's demonstration of Elp16. As Spinoza argues,

This proposition must be plain to anyone, provided he attends to the fact that the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of the properties that really do follow necessarily from it (that is, from the very essence of the thing); and that it infers more properties the more the definition of the thing expresses reality, that is, the more reality the essence of the thing defined involved. (Elp16dem)

The claim that particular things follow from God's essence by way of deduction is supported and made more explicit by Spinoza's account in the scholium to proposition 17. He writes,

I have shown clearly enough (see P16) that from God's supreme power, or infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, that is, all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, in the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles. (Elp17s)

The triangle analogy seems to suggest that particular things follow from God's nature or essence in the same way that properties follow from the essence of a triangle—a claim that also appears in several places in the *Ethics* and the correspondence (e.g., Ep21 and 34); it also seems consistent with the geometrical spirit of Spinoza's philosophy. In particular, the analogy seems to fit with Spinoza's claim in the appendix to the first part of the *Ethics* that mathematics offers the norm of truth by which we might analyze essences. In addition, the model of entailment seems most adequate to emphasize the timeless character of the way things are entailed by the infinite nature of substance and the necessary connection Spinoza asserts in Elp16 between the nature of substance and all the particular things that follow from it (i.e., whatever falls under an infinite intellect).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The entailment model has a long historical pedigree; it can be traced to Bayle's reading of Spinoza's account of substance-mode relationships in terms of predicates (modes) inhering in a subject (substance). This approach has been developed in various ways in Jarrett 1977, Bennett 1984, Carrierio 1995, and Della Rocca 2008. For criticism of the entailment model, see also Curley 1969; 1988 and Mason 1986; 1997.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Della Rocca 2008 and Vilijanen 2011. Di Poppa (2013) challenges Della Rocca's view by showing that causation is a more fundamental relation than conceptual connection.

Viljanen (2011) has recently argued in favor of this approach. He contends that Spinoza's aim is to reduce all causality to some version of "formal causality" (2011, 44). Formal causality is the traditional scholastic notion employed in order to account for the way in which effects immanently and necessarily follow from a certain nature or substance. Viljanen also reminds us that formal causality was traditionally used in the context of understanding the connection between the definitions and properties of geometrical objects. According to Viljanen's reading, God acts immanently by unfolding the consequences that necessarily follow from his nature, that is, by producing finite modes. Likewise, the activity of finite modes would consist in the unfolding of effects that are entailed by their own essences (127–28).

However, the entailment model faces two major problems when it comes to accounting for the way in which God's immanent activity supports the activity of finite modes. First, the entailment model seems to preclude any possibility of proper "efficient" causality among finite modes. Yitzhak Melamed has argued that immanent causation applies to God alone, while causal relationships between finite modes are better understood in terms of transitive efficient causation.<sup>19</sup> From a more historical point of view, the formal cause was usually seen as an "internal" cause that acts by virtue of its union with a certain subject, while the efficient cause was seen as an "external" cause that acts upon a subject that exists outside of it.<sup>20</sup> If all causation were reduced to formal causation (and if formal causation were to retain its historical meaning), there would be no causes capable of operating outside of themselves on external things and all causation would be immanent causation. However, this point is in fact quite clearly denied by Spinoza, who explicitly mentions that the activity of finite modes is not always a form of immanent activity. In E3def2 Spinoza uses the expression "when something happens, in us or outside us" [*aliquid in nobis, aut extra nos fit*], which he equates with "when something in us or outside us follows from our nature" [*cum ex nostra natura aliquid in nobis, aut extra nos sequitur*], in reference to being active and being passive, respectively. Spinoza's phrasing explicitly includes transient causality (with the clause "something . . . outside us follows") within the scope of his definition. Yet, if "formal" causality captures only immanent causality, it would not fit Spinoza's definition of the activity of finite modes.

Consider, for instance, the case of an individual acting under the guidance of reason, so that it would count as active. Such a rational individual

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<sup>19</sup> Melamed 2012. Melamed (2006) explains why God's immanent causation must be understood as a kind of *efficient* causation.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputations*, 17.1.6, in Suárez 1994, 9–10.



would also enjoy active effects of *nobility*, which is “the desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship” (E3p59s). Helping other individuals and consolidating friendship are effects that result from engaging with other human beings and building social relationships with them. Such effects do not follow in the same way that the properties of a triangle follow from its definition; rather, they follow as the building of a house stems from the efficient power of the builder. Since the way in which a rational free man acts provides the primary example of adequate causation, it is unlikely that the model of formal causality could suffice for Spinoza’s understanding of adequate causation.

Second, the entailment model does not seem to be able to account for God’s being the efficient cause of the *existences* of finite modes. Spinoza maintains that the existence of finite modes does not follow from their essence (E1p24) but only because God, *qua* modified by a certain finite mode (existing in a certain time and place), determines another finite mode to exist and to operate (E1p28). Now, assume that (as the entailment model holds) God’s activity amounts to the fact that God *entails* by his nature the whole infinite manifold of finite modes. God’s act of determining a finite mode to exist and to operate would thus amount to the fact that the existence and operation of this finite mode can be *deduced* from the existence and operation of the infinite chain of finite modes that is necessarily given in God *sub specie aeternitatis*. However, Spinoza holds that nothing finite (such as the determined existence and operation of a finite mode) can follow directly from an infinite being. As he writes in the demonstration of E1p28: “what is finite and has a determinate existence could not have been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God.” This statement is used to demonstrate that the existence of finite modes cannot follow directly from God’s attributes or from infinite modes. However, the infinite chain of finite modes considered as a whole is commonly regarded as a good example of a mediate infinite mode (L7s, after E2p13). The entailment model, by reducing the notions of “activity” and “causal production” to that of “entailment” and “deduction,” erases any conceptual space to conceive of how the existence of a finite mode can be caused by the infinite chain of finite modes without entailing that the existence of something finite follows directly from the existence of something infinite. In fact, it is because finite modes exist in a way that goes beyond the way in which the theorems of Euclidian geometry are implicitly entailed in its axioms, that God should operate as an *efficient* cause (E1p16c1) to bring about finite things and determine them to exist according to a

certain causal chain (E1p27–29).<sup>21</sup> Unless one is willing to embrace a strong Parmenidean reading of Spinoza<sup>22</sup> and contend that durational existence is purely fictional, and not something that *really* exists (in any genuine ontological sense), the entailment model does not seem able to account for the way in which finite modes can also exist in a durational way (insofar as God causes their existence, not *qua* infinite substance but, *qua* being modified by other finite modes).

Given the difficulties just discussed concerning the entailment model, we would like to consider another model of the relationship between God's immanent activity and the activity of finite modes. We call this a "productive" model. It is based on the idea that what a thing can produce as an efficient cause is central in the *Ethics*. While the entailment model focuses on the way in which properties follow from the nature of a thing, the productive model highlights the power a thing has to affect other things.

Versions of this approach to the way in which finite modes operate have been defended by several scholars. Most noteworthy is Alexandre Matheron's seminal work on Spinoza's ontology of power. Pierre Macherey interprets the distinction between "action" and "operation" as a conceptual tool to capture the double causal relationship between God and finite modes; where finite modes are determined to operate by external causes (E1p28) and also internally determined to bring about their own actions (E1p25 and E3p6dem).<sup>23</sup> This approach has also been developed by Francesca Di Poppa (2010), who draws on Whitehead's notion of process in order to argue that, in Spinoza's ontology, "the basic entities are processes or activities rather than things and properties" (279). Di Poppa, however, does not elaborate on the way in which the activity of finite modes (in the sense of E3def2) can be supported by God's immanent activity.

In several recent contributions, Mogens Lærke (2009; 2011; 2012) has articulated a refined account of Spinoza's concept of causality by showing how the causality of finite modes is God's self-causation (E1p25). In particular, commenting on E1p25c, Lærke observes that, in Spinoza's account of causation, divine self-causation and causation among modes are one and the same: "finite causal relations are ways in which God causally relates to

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<sup>21</sup> Nachtomy (2011) further develops this point by stressing that the entailment model makes the notion of God's activity redundant, since if everything is entailed in God's nature as properties are entailed in a geometrical definition, it is not clear that there remains anything for God "to do."

<sup>22</sup> Della Rocca (2016), for instance, argues that all multiplicity in Spinoza is mind-dependent and the only thing that genuinely exists is God's substance. We would like to thank Michael della Rocca and Karolina Hübner for having confronted us with the objection discussed in this paragraph.

<sup>23</sup> See Matheron 1991 and Macherey 1992, 69–109. See also Nachtomy 2011.

himself through his modes” (Lærke 2012, 16). On this basis, Lærke further argues that “the immanent cause designates the immanence of a term in the cause, namely, the participation of the finite mode in the causality as such” (Lærke 2009, 185, our translation). In other words, God’s immanent causation is nothing but the way in which Spinoza describes (and is thus reducible to) finite causation as God’s self-causation.

We think that the productive model, especially as it is developed by Lærke, is better suited to capture the way in which the activity of finite modes in the *Ethics* should be understood. We agree with Macherey (1992, 108) and Lærke (2009; 2012) in holding that God’s immanent activity is the ground for the activity of finite things. As we have shown in section 2, however, Spinoza’s notion of God’s immanent causality in the *KV* does not entail that finite modes will be active in any robust sense. Our main contention is that, in the *Ethics*, what allows Spinoza to ground the activity of finite modes in God’s activity is the fact that he conceives God’s activity as *nothing but* the activity of finite modes. Let us elaborate on this point.

In Elp7 Spinoza demonstrates that “it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.” The demonstration runs as follows: “a substance cannot be produced by anything else (by P6C); therefore it will be the cause of itself [*causa sui*], that is (by D1), its essence necessarily involves existence, or it pertains to its nature to exist.” D1 (invoked here) is the definition of *causa sui*, which reads: “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” Despite several details that might require further discussion, Spinoza’s overall argument here is straightforward. Since no substance can be produced by another substance (Elp6), the existence of a substance must depend on the substance’s own nature. The essence of a thing is what defines the nature of that thing. In the case of God or substance, what defines its nature is the very act of producing existence. This point is further stressed at the end of the first part of the *Ethics* where Spinoza demonstrates that “God’s power is his essence itself” (Elp34). The demonstration reads: “for from the necessity alone of God’s essence it follows that God is the cause of himself (by P11) and (by P16 and P16C) of all things. Therefore, God’s power, by which he and all things exist and act, is his essence itself” (Elp34dem). The demonstration makes clear that God’s “power” mentioned in the proposition is nothing but God’s act of producing existence as *causa sui* (given that Elp11 quoted in Elp34dem relies on Elp7 mentioned above). God’s nature is thus understood in terms of what God *does* and, more precisely, as God’s eternal activity of producing existence.

Building on the claim that God’s nature is the act of producing its own existence, we stress that, for Spinoza, God’s existence involves the existence

of all of its modifications. In E1p25 Spinoza makes this point explicit by stating that "God is the efficient cause, not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence." In the scholium, Spinoza clarifies:

This proposition follows more clearly from P16. For from that it follows that from the given divine nature both the essence of things and their existence must necessarily be inferred; and in a word, God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself. (E1p25s)

God is called *causa sui* in the sense defined in E1p7, namely, insofar as God is the act of causing existence. As Lærke (2009; 2012) argues, in E1p25s Spinoza states that this is also the *same* sense in which God must be called the cause of all things, which means that God is the cause of all things because God's act of causing existence is nothing but the act of causing existence of *all* possible things (E1p16).

As was already mentioned in the introduction, the demonstration of E3p6 is usually considered to provide the conjunction between God's power and the activity (or conatus) of finite things. Spinoza writes:

Singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by IP25C), that is, (by IP34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts. . . . Therefore, as far it can, and it lies in itself, it [each thing] strives to persevere in its being. (E3p6dem)

The standard reading of this passage takes the reference to E1p34 to capture the relationship between God's power and the power or conatus of finite things. God's essence is his power; finite things are modes of God's substance; hence, finite things express God's power in a finite and determinate way. This reading presupposes that God's power has some sort of priority over finite things, which simply operate on its basis. *Prima facie*, such a reading presents a view not dissimilar from the weak sense of activity we found in the KV and discussed in section 2.

However, in the *Ethics*, God's power cannot be conceived as *prior* to the power of finite things. The reason is that God's power is nothing but its power to produce existence, and existence always comes expressed in an infinite manifold of modes. God's act of causing existence does not produce existence in general or in an unqualified manner, but, rather, it produces the whole variety of things that exist in actuality. This implies that the sense in which finite things express "in a certain and determinate way God's power" (as Spinoza states in E3p6dem) means that God's power is *nothing other* than the power through which finite things strive to bring about determinate effects. The existence of God is not a general existence, but it coincides with the existence of an infinite manifold of singular things, defined by specific

traits, which strive to bring about those effects which it is in their essence to produce. As an expression of God's power, each mode is nothing but a qualified and determined striving to bring about those particular effects. Insofar as this striving is successful, the thing is an adequate cause of its own effects and thus "active" in the robust sense defined in E3def1–2.

This suggests that the strivings of finite things are the expression of God's infinite activity. At the same time, however, God's productive activity (construed as causality) is nothing other than the modifications of God's attributes.<sup>24</sup> In the *Political Treatise*—completed a few years after the *Ethics*—Spinoza boldly states that "the power of natural things [*rerum naturalium potentia*] by which they exist, and consequently by which they act, can be no other than the eternal power of God [*ipsissima Dei sit potentia*]" (TP2, 2). This phrasing [*ipsissima*] supports the view that God's power and the power of finite things are very closely related.

According to the productive model, finite things are defined through the effects they bring about by virtue of their own nature. According to Spinoza's definition of a "singular thing," what counts as a singular thing depends on whether or not it is possible to ascribe to a certain individual or to a group of individuals a certain effect. As he writes, "if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing" (E2def7). What makes a thing *one thing* is its power to bring about certain effects, independent of how composite the nature of the thing itself is. Moreover, as E3p7 makes clear, insofar as each thing exists, it constantly strives to bring about effects that stem from its nature. Accordingly, each thing is always active to some degree (dependent on whether or not its striving is successful and the extent to which the thing's power to bring about certain effects is hindered by external causes). While the activity through which a mode affects another mode can be considered a form of transient causality, the whole of the activity of finite modes is nothing but the whole activity of God. In this sense, according to the productive model, God's immanent activity is fully expressed by the activity of finite modes. God is immanently active in the sense that finite modes are immanently and transiently active upon each other.

According to the productive model, the relation between the infinite substance and its finite modifications can be described in such a way that there is only a modal distinction between them. This means that modes cannot exist apart from the substance that they affect, but it also implies that the

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<sup>24</sup> Lærke (2012, 74) reaches a similar conclusion: "That God is the immanent cause of all things just means that finite causation metaphysically speaking must be understood in terms of the modifications that God undergoes in the process of causing himself."

substance does not actually exist separately from its modes. While the substance is prior to its modes in the sense that it grounds their being, when it comes to actual existence, the substance *is* what it is because it exists as modified in certain ways. Not only can one say that the activity of the finite modes and the activity of the substance are inseparable, but one can go as far as saying that they are one and the same activity. According to a common reading of the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, the infinite substance is active and the finite modes are mere passive results of that activity. God is seen as a cause and the modes as the effects of his activity. This (admittedly natural) reading of the distinction raises the apparent problem of how the gap between the infinite substance and finite modes may be bridged (and how the causal power could be transmitted from the infinite to the finite). As we have seen, this is similar to what Spinoza presupposed in the *Short Treatise*. In the *Ethics*, using the reading we advance, there is no gap to be bridged because the activity of finite modes is nothing but the activity of the substance. It is the very modifications of God's attributes that Spinoza describes as finite things. One might argue that this still requires a mysterious transition from the infinite to the finite. But the mystery dissolves if we recall that, according to Spinoza, "particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way" (E1p25c).

On our reading, there is no mysterious transition from the infinite to the finite. The key is to grasp Spinoza's point that particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, that is, modifications of God's attributes expressed in a determinate and, hence, *finite* way. For example, particular bodies are determinate expressions of God's attribute of extension. Because they are particular modifications, they are also finite since they are limited or bounded, both in space and duration: they are bounded by the ways in which they are temporally and spatially extended. It is in this sense that they are finite and limited. The attribute itself, abstracted from its particular and durational modifications is unchanged, complete, and hence is appropriately called infinite. The activity of God (or the causal power of the substance) is not distinct from the activity (or the causal powers) of its modes. Rather, the activity of the modes is the very activity of God. God's causal power is fully expressed in the causal powers of its modes. This is the way God, seen as substance, acts; that is, through its attributes and modes, so that its activity modifies itself. If this is right, there is no mystery in the relation between the infinite substance and finite modes.

Before concluding, we would like to address the following (rather obvious) objection: in the very first proposition of the *Ethics*, Spinoza flatly states that "a substance is prior in nature to its affections" (E1p1). If, as we argue, the

activity of substance is nothing other than that of its affections, it would seem that not only do the affections depend on the substance but also that the substance depends on its affections because, if it acts through its affections, then it would need the affections in order to act. Now, for God to act is for God to exercise its power, and it is worth recalling that Spinoza equates God's power with its very essence (E1p34). Thus, if the activity of modes is required for the substance's activity, this would seem to conflict with the priority of substance over its affections—but, for Spinoza, the dependence of the affections on the substance is very clear and obvious. The affections are seen as modifications of an attribute, which, in turn, constitutes the essence of the substance. Thus, no affection can occur in nature without the substance and its attributes. However, it is also true that the substance can and does exist when *particular* modes do not. By nature, finite modes are limited to particular duration and are bounded in space. The substance, instead, always exists regardless, and as it undergoes finite modifications, it remains one and the same. Thus, there is a clear asymmetry between the substance over its affections—and hence a priority of the one over the other. Claiming that God's power is nothing over and above the power of the whole chain of finite modes does not imply that God's power depends on certain *particular* modifications; it only implies that *some* modification of its attributes is necessary.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We have observed that, in the KV, Spinoza employs the notion of God's immanent causation to explicate God's activity. At the same time, we have argued that, in his early work, Spinoza is not committed to the view that finite things are active in the *Ethics*' robust sense. In the KV, finite things are presented as constantly acted upon by external causes and arguably deprived of independent causal efficacy to bring about their own effects. We have argued that the main novelty Spinoza introduces in the *Ethics* is that God's power is expressed via the power of finite things. God's activity is nothing beyond the activity of finite modes. This makes finite modes active in a more robust sense, namely, as "adequate causes" of the effects that follow from their nature. If, as we have argued, Spinoza's thinking changed between the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics* along the lines suggested above, Spinoza's reasons to effect such a change certainly require further investigation.

As a set of final remarks, we would like to advance a few suggestions concerning the reasons for the evolution of Spinoza's thought on activity. It is often acknowledged that Spinoza takes Descartes as a major polemical target

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<sup>25</sup> In other words, in reality, an attribute is always modified in some way.



in his early writings.<sup>26</sup> In the KV, one of Spinoza's main concerns was to take issue with some of the crucial tenets of Descartes's position (e.g., the nature of free will and the account of human passions—both covered in KV2). At this juncture, it was less crucial for Spinoza to reflect on the activity of finite modes. In fact, as discussed in section 2, Spinoza is happy to exploit an argument about God's continuous creation (which entails that finite modes do not have causal power on their own) to counter Descartes's account of free will. In the *Ethics*, completed fourteen years after the KV, Descartes is still an explicit polemical target (E5, Pref). However, Spinoza's system and his account of the affects changed significantly. At the center of this account we now find a developed reflection on the notion of conatus and the power of acting, which did not play any central role in the KV.<sup>27</sup> This new conceptual development arguably led Spinoza to further reflect on the metaphysical underpinnings of his views and adjust his account of God's immanent causation in order to create the conceptual space needed to conceive of finite modes as active in a more robust sense. We argued that the notion of *causa sui* plays a pivotal role in this conceptual reworking that occupies the *Ethics*. Interestingly, the same notion is mentioned in KV1, 3, but it does not receive any development, nor does it play any major role in Spinoza's argumentation at that juncture. From a historical point of view, it is also worth recalling that, during the same decades 1660–1670, authors such as Geulincx, Cordemoy, La Forge, and Malebranche were developing and disseminating different brands of occasionalism (i.e., the claim that finite things are not real efficacious causes but that God is the only cause of all effects) as the most natural development of Descartes's own position. Spinoza's mature reflection in the *Ethics* on the activity of finite modes marks a radical departure from the approach developed by many other Cartesians, and further shows how distant Spinoza's metaphysics remains from the kind of metaphysics developed by other followers of Descartes.<sup>28</sup>

If our suggestion is correct, then the reasons for the evolution of Spinoza's metaphysics should be sought in the evolution of his moral views and his theory of the affects. This topic surely deserves to be treated in its own right. Nonetheless, this paper draws attention to the way in which key notions in Spinoza's philosophy, such as that of “activity,” have both metaphysical and

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Matheron 1987 concerning the TIE and Sangiacomo 2015b concerning TIE and KV.

<sup>27</sup> Sangiacomo (2016) argues that the account of “conatus” presented in E3 is, in fact, absent in its full development before 1664.

<sup>28</sup> Concerning the relationship and opposition between Spinoza and Malebranche, see Sangiacomo, forthcoming.



moral dimensions and how the evolution of Spinoza's metaphysical system was also driven by moral concerns.

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